

'Contra' aid faces uphill battle

Reagan's new pitch to provide arms for 'freedom fighters' draws much the same opposition that stymied '85 request

By Peter Osterlund
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

President Reagan faces an uphill fight in his effort to have Congress approve \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid to the Nicaraguan "contras" over the next 18 months. Mr. Reagan formally submitted the new aid package Tuesday, saying in a message to the House and Senate that the \$27 million in aid Congress agreed to last year was not enough.

More than 30 House members had asked the President not to seek renewal of direct military assistance to the rebels. Rather, they have urged him to seek a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

The Reagan plan faces heavy opposition in the Senate and House intelligence committees, say aides for both panels. Approval by both committees will be needed in order to provide the aid from funds already allocated to the Defense Department. The administration says \$70 million of the aid would be offered to the contras for "any kind of assistance [the President] deems appropriate." That is generally understood to mean secret, or "covert," military aid, which Congress has previously rejected.

Leading members of the President's own party in both House and Senate have advised the White House that, in this year of budget cuts, Congress will almost certainly not approve a nearly 400 percent increase in aid to the contras.

Those opposed to military aid for the rebels fighting the Nicaragua's Marxist regime say the proposal, as it now stands, has almost no chance of passing. "The Congress has five times rejected military assistance to the contras," says Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D) of Maryland, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. "I don't think this can pass

the House."

But those pledged to fight for the administration's proposal in Congress believe evidence of the increasingly repressive nature of the Sandanista regime provides them with some powerful ammunition.

"I do sense a somewhat different feeling today [among lawmakers] that negotiations alone aren't going to get you very much," says House minority leader Robert H. Michel (R) of Illinois.

Some congressmen opposed to so-called lethal aid to the contras said they would seek a prohibition of such help

while allowing "humanitarian aid," including such nonmilitary items as food, uniforms, and medical supplies. "I think we've got the votes," said Sen. David Durenberger (R) of Minnesota.

In one sense, the administration is well positioned to exert pressure on a reluctant Congress to increase the amount of aid extended to the rebels.

Congressional observers cite the recent experiences in the Philippines and Haiti — where the United States provided the means for unpopular heads of state to remove themselves from their countries — as foreign policy triumphs for President Reagan that have heightened his standing on Capitol Hill.

Yet the peculiar conditions of last year's vote — in which the House executed a dramatic about-face and voted \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the contras shortly after Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega traveled to Moscow for consulta-

tions with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev — are not likely to be present this year.

Lawmakers who supported the rebel aid on the condition that rebels improve their record on human rights violations have been disappointed by what they see as a lack of progress in that regard.



Nicaraguan rebel trains near Costa Rica border